

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 HA-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02
SS-15 ICA-11 /081 W
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P R 311246Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2358
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 TUNIS 6150

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV ELAB PINR TS
SUBJ: SITUATION FACING BOURGUIBA ON HIS RETURN
TO TUNISIA

1. PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA RETURNS THIS AFTERNOON AT 1630 FROM A PROLONGED STAY IN SWITZERLAND AND FRANCE. HE WILL ALMOST IMMEDIATELY HAVE TO FACE A COMPLEX OF HIGHLY COMPLICATED AND CLOSELY INTERRELATED POLITICAL PROBLEMS REQUIRING DECISIONS. THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT IS BUILDING HIS RETURN INTO A MAJOR EVENT AND, BY EMPHASING HIS VIGOR AND RENEWED GOOD HEALTH, HAS LEFT THE IMPRESSION THAT HE WILL BE TAKING A FAR MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN THE POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. WHETHER OR NOT DECISIONS THAT MUST BE MADE IN COMING WEEKS ARE TAKEN PERSONALLY BY BOURGUIBA, THEY WILL UNQUESTIONABLY REQUIRE HIS PERSONAL APPROVAL. FOLLOWING MAY BE USEFUL AS BACKGROUND.

2. THE BASIC PROBLEM FACING TUNISIAN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AT THIS MOMENT IS WHETHER TO ADOPT A POLICY OF
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LIBERALIZATION AND RECONCILIATION OR TO DIG IN ITS HEELS AND ATTEMPT TO CONTINUE THE STATUS QUO WITH THE GOVERNING PARTIE SOCIALIST DESTOURIEN (PSD) AS THE SOLE VEHICLE FOR POLITICAL EXPRESSION. THIS IS NOT A DECISION THAT CAN BE--ONCE AGAIN--POSTPONED VERY EASILY. THE WAY IN WHICH THE GOVERNMENT PROCEEDS IN THE CASE OF HABIB ACHOUR AND THE FORMER UGTT LEADERSHIP

AWAITING TRIAL FOR COMPLICITY IN THE DISTURBANCES OF JANUARY 26, MAY WELL DETERMINE THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE IN TUNISIA IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT WISHES IT OR NOT.

3. A DECISION ON THE TRIAL OF THE TRADE UNIONISTS MUST BE MADE SOON ONLY ONE DAY BEFORE THE PRESIDENT'S RETURN, THE TUNISIAN SUPREME COURT (COURT OF CASSATION) UPHELD THE SOUSSE COURT'S OPINION OF ITS INCOMPETENCE TO TRY ONE OF THE THREE CASES ON THE GROUNDS THAT STATE SECURITY WAS INVOLVED (TUNIS 6111). THE CHOICE BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT IS NOW CLEARLY TO PROCEED TO A TRIAL (OR TRIALS) BEFORE THE STATE SECURITY COURT OR TO DROP PROSECUTION. THE FIRST COURSE WILL, NO DOUBT, OPEN THE GAT TO CONSIDERABLE FOREIGN CRITICISM. THE SECOND WOULD BE A DOMESTIC EMBARRASSMENT TO THE GOVERNMENT OF PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA. IN ANY CASE, THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT DRAG ITS FEET FOR LONG, SINCE ACHOUR AND HIS COLLEAGUES HAVE ALREADY BEEN AWAITING TRIAL FOR SEVEN MONTHS, AND AN ENTIRE NEW CASE WILL HAVE TO BE BUILT IF CHARGES ARE TO BE PREFERRED ON SECURITY GROUNDS.

4. EVERYONE SEEMS TO THINK THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL PROCEED TO PROSECUTE IN STATE SECURITY COURT. THE DEFENSE WELCOMES SUCH A COURSE. IN THE PAST, STATE SECURITY COURT TRIALS HAVE BEEN OPEN TO THE PUBLIC AND
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THE PRESS AND GHE DEFENSE WOULD, PRESUMABLY, BE IN A POSITION TO CHARGE THAT PSD DIRECTOR MOHAMED SAYAH AND HIS FOLLOWERS INSTIGATED THE RIOTS OF JANUARY 26. THE GOVERNMENT WOULD ALSO HAVE TO FACE THE DIFFICULT DECISION OF WHETHER TO ACCUSE LIBYA OF COMPLICITY IN THE EVENTS OF JANUARY 26 AND THEREBY CREATE INTERNATIONAL COMPLICATIONS OF ANOTHER KIND.

5. WHATEVER THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION, IT MUST ALSO DECIDE WHAT ACTION TO TAKE IN REGARD TO INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC DEMANDS FOR A FULL INVESTIGATION OF TORTURE CHARGES THAT CAME OUT OF THE SOUSSE TRIAL. THE OPPOSITION MOVEMENT OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (MSD) IS NOW COMMITTED IN ITS TWO WEEKLY PAPERS TO A CONFRONTATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT ON THIS ISSUE AS WELL AS THE ISSUE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR JANUARY 26. ITS PRESS ORGANS HAVE ALREADY GONE SO FAR AS TO SUGGEST THAT PARTY DIRECTOR SAYAH SHOULD FACE TRIAL WITH ACHOUR TO DETERMINE WHO WAS REALLY RESPONSIBLE.

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6. NONE OF THE ABOVE PROBLEMS CAN BE ATTACKED BY THE
GOT IN ISOLATION. WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT MAKES A
MOVE IN REGARD TO TRYING ACHOUR, TORTURE CHARGES,
RECOGNIZING THE MSD AS A LEGITIMATE OPPOSITION PARTY,
OR COUNTERING THE OPPOSITION PRESS CAMPAIGN, THERE
WILL BE IMMEDIATE REPERCUSSIONS IN THE OTHER AREAS; AND
DECISIONS IN ANY OF THESE AREAS WILL TEND TO SHAPE THE
DECISION ON WHETHER TO PURSUE A POLICY OF RECONCILIATION.
THE ORIGINS OF THIS DEBATE GO BACK TO LATE 1977 WHEN
ADVOCATES OF LIBERALIZATION (WHETHER FOR PERSONAL OR
PHILOSOPHICAL REASONS IS NOW RELATIVELY UNIMPORTANT)
WERE REMOVED FROM THE GOVERNMENT. THEY HAVE NOT,
HOWEVER, BEEN FINALLY DEFEATED BY THE "HARDLINERS".
THE RUMOR PERSISTS THAT THE MAN WHO HAS COME TO RE-
PRESENT A POLICY OF RECONCILIATION, FORMER MINISTER OF
INTERIOR TAHAR BELHODJA, WILL FOLLOW BOURGUIBA BACK
FROM FRANCE (INDEED HIS DAUGHTER INSISTS THAT HE WILL
ARRIVE TODAY). WHETHER HE DOES OR NOT, IT HAS AL-
READY BEEN ANNOUNCED THAT THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE, WASSILA,
WILL RETURN FROM FRANCE WITH HIM, AND MOST TUNISIANS
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PRESUME THAT SHE IS DOING SO ON THE UNDERSTANDING
THAT THE POLITICAL CLIMATE WILL BE CONGENIAL TO HER

AND THOSE WHOM SHE SUPPORTS, PRINCIPALLY BELHODJA.

7. THE TIME COULD BE RIPE FOR A MOVE TOWARD RECONCILIATION. THE TUNISIAN COURTS HAVE DEMONSTRATED THEIR INDEPENDENCE (UNLESS THE EVIDENCE HAS BEEN COOKED TO A DEGREE WHICH NOW SEEMS BARELY CREDIBLE) AND HAVE GIVEN THE GOT AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXTRICATE ITSELF FROM AN INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT SITUATION. A DESISION NOT TO PROSECUTE THE TRADE UNIONISTS FURTHER, OR IF THEY ARE CONVICTED TO GIVE THEM A QUICK PRESIDENCIAL PARDON, WOULD BE A CLEAR SIGN THAT RECONCILIATION IS DESIRED. THERE ARE THOSE WHO ARGUE THAT THIS WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT FOR PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA. WE ARE NOT CONVINCED THAT THIS IS THE CASE. THE PRIME MINISTER HAS HAD TO SWALLOW HIS PRIDE BEFORE, AND THERE IS ALREADY A REPORT THAT HE PLANS TO RECOMMEND TO THE PRESIDENT THAT PARTY DIRECTOR SAYAH BE DROPPED; AND THIS, INDEED, WOULD SEEM TO BE A MINIMUM REQUIREMENT FOR ANY POLICY OF RECONCILIATION.

8. IT IS ALSO QUITE POSSIBLE THAT THE PRESIDENT WILL EITHER DECIDE ON OR GIVE HIS APPROVAL TO A MORE REGID POLICY TOWARD FOREIGN CRITICISM AND DOMISTIC OPPOSITION. AFTER TOURING TUNIS TODAY, HE WILL RETURN TO MONASTIR FOR HIS BIRTHDAY CELEGRATIONS AND THE TWO-DAY HOLIDAY MARKING THE END OF RAMADAN ON SEPTEMBER 4 AND 5. WHAT DECISIONS WILL THEN FOLLOW WILL DEPEND ON PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA. KING

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